

Epilogue: After the Storm by **CuriousNymph**

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Summary: The aftermath of the storm. There's always a silver lining to every cloud... right?

Epilogue: After the Storm

The epilogue to that little fic that had nearly 1000 hits after 15 hours of being posted - that's insane, guys! Thanks so much to anybody who's read and reviewed so far! It's always a delight to see people enjoying my work.

Hopefully this will clear up that little ending from Twelve Minutes to Eleven.

I would suggest - perhaps anachronistically - to listen to Oh Wonder with this, in particular 'White Blood', and 'Let it all go' by Birdy and Rhodes for the first part. Just check back with the playlist, really, folks. Hope it was an enjoyable mix-up for anyone who had a listen.

The days that passed after Eleven had walked into the storm became the hardest days Mike had ever had to live.

It had been a strange thing to watch, for one thing – to watch the love of your life walk into uncertain peril.

He'd known it from the start.

Eleven could very well die.

And the last thing he'd ever said to her – well, it had been as honest a thing as he could ever have asked for.

Promise me – this time, you won't disappear, right?

The last time this had happened, Mike had fallen into a rift so vast and so empty that he'd lost sense of who he was supposed to be - protector; leader; dungeon master; paladin; friend.

Lover, not a fighter.

Of course, that hadn't proved itself to be entirely true – Mike had learned fighting became a lot easier once it was for someone you cared about.

But after having it happen once, he'd vowed to never let it happen again.

Unfortunately, he'd never been able to keep that promise.

Watching her go like that – striding down the main road, the blistering, morning sunshine making her look almost otherworldly, her walk confident despite her trembling hands, facing off against the hurricanes of red clouds and flashing light, the sky turning in on itself

–

He'd felt something snap in him – like watching a rope break, and knowing the drop was shortly to follow.

Mike Wheeler was, in essence, a 17 year old kid who'd had so much shit thrown at him, and then finally had the absolute years of his life, with no crazy monsters trying to eat him alive.

And *then*, the one person who he needed - more than anybody - had walked right back out into the danger he'd so furiously tried to run away from, gripping her hand as tightly as he could, as he tried to pull her away with him.

He sat at home, and didn't eat, didn't sleep, didn't even dare close an eye for fear that she might reappear before his eyes, blinding in her beauty and ferocity.

She'd gone to kick ass in the Upside Down.

Whether she was coming back was another story.

A week passed.

Then another.

Then another.

November slipped into December, and as time passed on, Mike fell into a daze, not really sure how to feel about anything anymore. What did you do when you lost someone like that? Was this how death felt? Like a lingering kiss on the cheek when you were sleeping, with no mutter of a goodbye?

He sighed for weeks, shrugging his way into school with his hair a curly, floppy mess, the bags under his eyes making him look like a corpse, and his breathy silence only punctuated by the quick, quiet answers he gave to his friends.

He wasn't selfish enough to think they didn't miss her, either. Lucas, and Max, and Will, and Dustin. They all loved her too. They all went about with a sombre haze around them, like a storm cloud wouldn't leave their personal skies.

But they didn't miss her like he did.

They hadn't loved her like he had.

December 8th marked exactly a month since Eleven had walked into the Netherworld, like Persephone to Hades' throne – and there'd been no word. Not even a whimper that she might be alive.

So Mike decided to investigate.

He drove out, finally having gotten a license, in his Dad's old car, and he drove, and drove, the windows open, the low, winter sunlight pouring in through the windscreen, the breeze cool and crisp on his freckled cheeks, and he'd furiously tried to think of other things.

He'd pulled up, in the middle of nowhere, on the road where they'd left her.

The sun was blinding in its clarity, the winter providing a tilt for its harsh light to dance over the dry tarmac of the road, white dashes stark and prominent in the early morning.

He sat in the car, fingers drumming the wheel, not entirely sure what he was doing.

Was he just going to sit here, then?

It had been too long since he'd done something so reckless. The words 'spontaneous' and 'daring' had never been friends with Mike before – not that he could remember. Maybe not when he'd been himself. Maybe when he'd lashed out – but then anger was hardly a planned thing.

It was only on his final wait (having nearly decided to turn around and leave about 4 times before that point in the past 15 minutes) that he saw the clouds converge.

The red flashed in the darkened skies, the lightning crackled, the air shivered with the cold heat, and, like a fleck of dust seen in a dust beam,

Somebody walked out.

Mike's body had frozen, his fingers stilled on the leather-bound wheel, and all he could think to do was slowly unlock the car, and slip out, hand gripping the top edge of the car door as he watched the figure continue down the path.

They seemed to stumble half way down their trek, still a good dozen metres or so out, and that was when Mike snapped out of his paralysis and ran.

He sprinted down the main road, swiping at his eyes furiously with the back of his hand, as he thundered down the road, not sure what he was expecting to see. He finally skidded to a halt, watching as the girl took in a deep breath, hands curling on the tarmac like she wanted her fingers to drive gouges into the road.

Never in his life had he ever been so breathless.

That was when she looked up, her two nostrils crusted with dried blood, her eye shadow all but gone, save for one sweep over her right eye, her hair sticking out in odd places, her skin pale, her clothes torn at the shoulders by something that did not resemble claws.

She'd absolutely been through hell.

And yet - some small part of him knew she'd never looked more beautiful.

Mike could hear her breathing, ragged but –

She was –

"Eleven," he breathed, dropping to his knees, the thud sending jitters

up his spine, but he didn't care.

She looked up at him, her dark, brown eyes catching the light, turning them amber.

"Mike," she whispered.

Mike couldn't take it anymore.

He took her face in his hands, smoothing away her tears as they flooded down her cheeks, his own running into his mouth, the salt making his lip sting where he'd chewed away the skin in worry.

He gathered her into his arms, holding her into him as his chin found the crook of her shoulder, her hair against his cheek, the faint smell of dust, blood and sweat coming off of her, but he barely noticed it, as he felt waves of relief wash over him at the fact that she was *here*.

Her knees came up to curl into him, hands furiously holding onto him around his neck, her fingers trailing soothing circles on his nape, breathing softly into his shoulder.

When she pulled back, just enough for him to rest his forehead against hers, the smile that had found its way onto her face was sad, and anguished, and pained, and joyed, and relieved, and so many, many shades of content. Mike smiled back, trying to make sense of this wondrous, brave, kind girl he held in his arms, the tears streaming down her face, his own mingling with the droplets on her cheeks. He let his fingers trace the lines of her face, shaking with the adrenaline and shock of seeing her after what felt like centuries apart. The kiss he placed on her fluttering eyelids seemed too delicate, but it was all he could manage, too afraid she'd disappear from his arms and all of this would turn out to be feverish, desperate dream.

"Mike," she whispered again, just as her eyes closed, drifting off into unconsciousness.

Mike gathered her slight form into him again, hand cupping her face as her head fell against his sweater-covered shoulder.

She was home.

Eleven was finally home.

The sun seemed to filter through the trees where they stood outside.

They'd been standing watching the sun's descent from its throne in the sky for nearly a decade.

Well. It'd been nearly a decade more than that, but not officially so.

"You remember the first time you came back, right?"

Eleven looked up at him, watching the sun cast its glow onto his hair. It had since grown out even more, now better resembling a sheep's wool more so than hers ever had. So much for stupid schoolyard nicknames. The black had a dozen bronze halos in the curls, the dark eyes soulful but playful, all in the same instance she looked at them. The freckles were like specks of gold on the planes of his face, the long limbs outstretched behind him as he gripped the gate behind her, looking out onto their endless field.

They had never been ones for noisy places. Hawkins had been noisy, but not like the city. They'd tried that – it hadn't suited them. So they'd moved out here, to a place where life felt like it had a liberty to slow down and appreciate the places in which it stood.

Mike looked down at her, looking as beautiful as a songbird in her eyes – he still looked young, despite his ripening years. It had only made him kinder, she felt.

"Yes," she murmured, swirling her glass of lemonade fondly. It had been a staple in her life ever since she'd drank it age 16, at her birthday party. She could still remember the long cycles out into the middle of nowhere that her, and Mike, and all the others had taken that afternoon. It made her heart buzz with the memories.

"And the second time?"

Mike looked down at her expectantly, dark eyebrow quirking up.

"At the Snow Ball?" Even now, Eleven said things with a casual innocence, like she needed to be corrected on asking questions. She'd cropped her hair even more now, going for a rumped, curly pixie cut

that made her eyes practically shine out from her face.

"Hmmm... after that," Mike leaned in, laughing as their noses brushed.

Eleven hummed in memory.

"Halfway," she giggled as he pressed a chaste kiss to her lips, his laughter soaking into her mouth as he continued to smile.

"You made a promise, remember?" he said.

She nodded once, taking a sip of her lemonade in between his kisses.

She playfully pushed him away by the tip of his nose.

He snorted in amusement, turning to look out at the sun dipping down in the sky.

"I know," Eleven murmured, tilting her head back to let the final, warm rays touch her neck. She loved the evenings. There was something unbearably sad about them, but they made up for it with the quiet, and the bronzed sunshine.

Mike sighed.

Eleven sighed in return.

"Thank you for everything, Mike."

Mike turned to look at her, her eyes closed in quiet contemplation. He kept admiring how effortlessly she'd grown into such a bright young woman. From such a small, tiny life, wandering alone, scared and lost, she'd somehow ignited a fire in herself that made her shine brighter than anyone else he knew. Eleven, once - long ago - the girl who looked like a boy, and couldn't understand the meaning of 'friend' or 'promise'. She'd become someone so in control of her own future - she'd left the past so very far behind.

He just couldn't believe how startlingly clear she was. How much she blinded him. How much she startled him.

Eleven was not someone you looked at without feeling just a little bit afraid, or a little bit in awe. But when they'd embarked on their strange quest, that only got stranger as time went on, her reality had merged with his and he'd been left to contemplate everything with new eyes.

He'd never looked back since.

"What for?"

She opened her eyes, looking at him, just as she looked out at the sun again, the wind blowing through her choppy, wavy hair.

"For finding me in the forest that night," she breathed out quietly, taking another sip of her lemonade.

Mike stared.

The silence seemed to drag on between them – 29 year olds without a care. How easily time had swept past them. He didn't feel his age - but maybe that wasn't the point.

Mike reached for her hand, squeezing it in response, just as he kissed her temple, resting his chin on her head.

Eleven sighed again.

"Halfway happy?" Mike jokingly asked, making Eleven smile shyly into her drink.

"More than halfway," she whispered.

The sun dipped its last bow, and the evening fell away.

Reviews are always appreciated - thank you again for the continuing support!